



**Anmeldelse af Inger Furseth (ed.) 2018.: Religious Complexity in the Public Sphere. Comparing Nordic Countries.**

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## Book Review

Inger Furseth (ed.) 2018.

*Religious Complexity in the Public Sphere. Comparing Nordic Countries.*

Cham (CH): Palgrave Macmillan. xxi + 341 pages.

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This edited book is the synthesis of the academic outcome of a five-year Nordic research project conducted from 2009 to 2014. Twenty three researchers from the Nordic countries— Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden—have contributed in groups of four to eight authors to five thematic, comparative chapters (Chapter 2 to 6): *Changing Religious Landscapes in the Nordic Countries* (50 pages), *Religion and State: Complexity in Change* (55 pages), *Religion on the Political Agenda* (54 pages), *Religion and the Media: Continuity, Complexity and Mediatization* (56 pages), and *Faith and Worldview Communities and Their Leaders – Inward or Outward Looking?* (39 pages). The *Introduction* (Chapter 1, 29 pages) and the final chapter *Secularization, Deprivatization, or Religious Complexity?* (Chapter 7, 22 pages) are written by the editor alone. The appendix outlines the methodology and gives further useful compilations of quantitative data from the project.

This joint writing must have been demanding for all contributors involved, not least for the editor herself. However, the efforts are fully worth the result. The chapters are generally well written, with a relatively uniform presentation. Thanks to the stringent editing the book has succeeded in combining the advantages of an edited book with those of the well-written monograph. As an edited book it has gathered experts in each of their respective subfields within an overall theme, thereby providing the reader with a broad range of cutting-edge knowledge. As a good monograph it has its strength in giving a coherent synthesis of the knowledge of a field that is too big to be treated properly in a single article.

In the introduction Furseth gives a clear and condensed presentation of the comparative scope of the book, and of four concepts used recurrently in the book: The public sphere, the public and private dichotomy, religion and secularity, and religious complexity. The latter concept has found its place in the title of the book for a good reason: Both in the introduction and in the concluding chapter, Furseth convincingly argues that ‘religious complexity’

gathers different and seemingly contradictory trends in the religious changes that have taken place in the Nordic countries during the last thirty to forty years. Furseth guides the reader to a concise understanding of the most significant trends in the religious complexity of the Nordic countries. These trends are recognizable in many other Western countries, in particular those dominated by various forms of Protestant Christianity. In that respect, the book should be a salient reference to similar comprehensive studies of religion in other countries or across countries. The elegant foreword by Craig Calhoun places the book into a wider perspective of the type of modernity that the Nordic countries represent.

A major asset of the book is that it contains a wealth of new empirical material of value for any scholar interested in religion in the Nordic countries today. Most importantly is, however, that it covers all five Nordic countries in a systematic, comparative way. The book definitely covers an unfulfilled need here – the last comparative sociological study of religion in the Nordic countries was Göran Gustafsson's *Religiös förändring i Norden* [Religious change in the Nordic countries] from 1985, just before immigration irreversibly changed the previous remarkable religious homogeneity of these countries.

The great similarities of the five Nordic countries and, yet, the subtle but important differences between them, justify the comparative approach and strengthen the general academic value of the book. I can recommend a slow reading of several sections to fully digest the information for inspiration. For example, on page 56, a table shows figures on church attendance in two periods, 1990–1993 and 2008–2010. The general tendency is a standstill or a slow decline in church attendance over the 18 years spanning the two periods. However, church attendance in Denmark at special holidays jumps from 18 percent of the population in 1990–1993 to 31 pct. 2008–2010. Thirty-one percent is the highest figure among all five Nordic countries, as also noted by the authors of the chapter, and it cries out for an attempt at explanation. The remarkable increase in church attendance covers the increasing popularity in Denmark of going to church on Christmas Eve, and my own interpretation is that it is an expression of the *national* significance, rather than the religious significance of Christmas in Denmark. This is in accordance with the notion, on page 307, that many Danes view the Danish majority church as “a symbol of Danish ethnicity and culture”. Overall, when reading through the book, it appears that in several respects Denmark stands out as the exception among the Nordic countries for its particularly strong intertwinement of state, church and nation.

The rising religious complexity is, however, not only manifested in the extensively reported statistics on the religious demography in the Nordic countries and data on media coverage. It is also a phenomenon that we observe on the streets, in public institutions and at most workplaces. For example, the cultural encounters between the majority and minorities in everyday life often take place in public space, as seen in contrast to the private space, and in particular episodes with conflicts that are often blown up in the media. The authors specifically state that the book studies the “presence and visibility of religion in the state, politics, media, and civil society” (p. 20). They could, perhaps, have extended the study to include more visible public religion, from headscarves to street missionaries.

The concept ‘public sphere’ appears in the title, and Chapters 4, 5 and 6 in particular address central topics in the public sphere. The introductory chapter gives an informative, short discussion of the concept of the public sphere, as introduced and defined by Jürgen

Habermas. In this chapter, Furseth argues that the public sphere has become so differentiated during the latest decades that, actually, several public spheres now co-exist.

The editor and the other authors have deliberately chosen to go beyond the classical concept of the public sphere. For example, the reporting of the results of the European Value Studies in Chapter 2 is highly relevant in a book like this, but the Value Studies only occasionally refer to the public sphere. This lack of fundamentalism in delimitations is laudable, because we first of all want a useful, comprehensive treatment of the rising religious complexity in the Nordic countries, and this has definitely been achieved.

In conclusion, the book makes a very valuable contribution to the sociology of religion, not only empirically, but also to some extent theoretically, and it will undoubtedly be referred to as a standard work for many years to come.

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